

Testimony of the
New York State School Boards Association
to the
New NY Education Reform Commission
Presented by William McDonald, Mohawk Valley Community College

Monday, September 24, 2012
Mohawk Valley Community College Technology
Performing Arts Conference Center Room
225 – 1101 Sherman Drive
Utica, New York 13501

Good Afternoon:

I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to testify before you. For over ten years I have been a board member for Oneida-Herkimer-Madison Counties Board of Cooperative Educational Services. I have also served as a past board member and president of the Remsen Central School District, a small, rural school district in northern Oneida County. Several of my colleagues have already shared their thoughts in regard to the five core principles of the New York State School Boards Association's Reform Agenda:

- Raise Expectations for All Students
- Stimulate the Student Learning Environment
- Strengthen the Education Workforce
- Cost Out an Adequate and Equitable Funding System
- Promote Greater Public and Parent Participation in Education

I am honored to share my thoughts with you today, and I ask the commission to demonstrate the bold leadership needed to bring the substantive change to education that truly puts New York's children first.

Core Principle #1: Raise Expectations for All Students

We need to challenge our students, all students, to reach their maximum potential. We need to challenge our students at a younger age, with increased vigor across the educational spectrum like our global competition does. To this end, universal Pre-K funding is vital and needs to be funded and implemented across the state.

Pre-K programs have been in place in some school districts for years. These students enter kindergarten with greater vocabulary, language, math, and overall school readiness skills than do students without this opportunity; especially in high needs urban and rural school districts. We have already diminished the opportunity for thousands of children by failing to support this program for every child.

In addition, the school year needs to be extended. The current educational schedule dates back to a time in America that is long gone. Students lose valuable skills and knowledge over the summer break, and educators are spending vital class time bringing them back-up to speed in the fall, wasting valuable educational time and money in the process.

Core Principle#2: Stimulate the Student Learning Environment

The educational system that we currently have in place does not meet the needs of the 21st century student. The world has changed, and education needs to change with it. The “one size fits all” approach to student achievement is not working.

Greater emphasis is needed on an individual student’s strengths, weaknesses and areas of interests. A meaningful focus on educating the whole child, physically, emotionally, and socially is required. We are building programming and pushing students to comply. Why are we not building programming to comply with the needs of the student?

In addition, technological advancement is exploding at an amazing rate. Children are exposed to technology at very young ages, and embrace it. When one sees an 8 year-old on his/her smart phone, searching the web, having instant access to more information in his/her hands than anyone has ever had access to, it’s clear that our education system has a lot of work to do to be relevant. If we do not infuse advanced technology into the classroom, we will alienate students and lose their interest.

We also need to dismantle silos, and consider online programming options across the state throughout the K-12 curriculum. In higher education, many students earn degrees without ever setting foot on a college campus. By offering online components of specialized coursework, students can access programming statewide, and perhaps nationally, regardless of the wealth of their community.

Core Principle #3: Strengthen the Education Workforce

In order for students to be successful, educators need to be current in their field. Getting and maintaining a job as a teacher should be one of the hardest challenges in the world. The bar needs to be set high, with preparation programs that strengthen the focus of meeting the needs of the entire child.

In the areas of math and science, pre-employment requirements need to be reviewed, and restrictions lifted, to attract experts in the field.

School districts also need the freedom to make decisions in regard to the quality of existing staff. Districts need to have a real mechanism to remove ineffective educators from the classroom. I certainly understand and appreciate the tenure system. It is time that true, meaningful, reform take place in this regard. Currently, we operate under a

“last in, first out” system. If staffing cuts need to occur, the decision is based almost solely on the seniority, not the quality, of the staff member. In some cases, this is not in the best interest of the district or the student.

Core Principle #4: Cost Out an Adequate and Equitable Funding System

There is no question but that the current system, with the reliance on property taxes to fund education in New York is not equitable, does not work, and is failing our students. This is particularly the case for the low wealth districts in our region where shrinking state and federal aid, an already tired taxpayer and tax cap legislation represent a perfect storm that is forcing program depletion and in some cases district consolidation.

The implications for New York are factual and documented. New York’s tax payers are some of the highest taxed in the nation. The results of which are commerce, jobs and citizens leaving the state in record numbers. We have asked our upstate communities to sacrifice and invest a tremendous amount of money to educate our children only to see them leave and build the economies of other states.

Core Principle #5: Promote Greater Public and Parent Participation in Education

Education is a business, and any business that does not engage their customers and exceed their expectations is doomed to fail. The public, and parents, are our customers, and they are paying more and more for our services each year and in many cases we are giving them less and less- certainly not the ideal business model.

School Board members are elected by their communities to be representatives of their communities.

One of the most frustrating and inevitable experiences for any school board member, however, is the realization that he/she has the ability to change very few things in the district. Communities should have the ability to determine which of the countless, ineffective, and in many cases, unfunded mandates that are strangling them are in their community’s best interest. In addition, school districts should have the ability to work closer and in partnership with community agencies for the mutual benefit of all.

I sincerely thank you for your commitment to our state, our communities, and our children. Please know that I have complete confidence in the Commission and trust that it will indeed demonstrate the bold leadership required in “Putting Students First.”